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MUSIC OF THE MONTH

SOME CELTIC MUSIC, OLD AND NEW

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

OSCAR WILDE declared that the Irish are too poetical ever to be poets. It is a taking phrase, but no closer to the fact than Oscar ever cared to get. But if he had said that the Irish are too musical (using the word in its broadest sense) ever to be music-makers, he would have found himself in an amazing marriage with truth. For that is precisely the case with the Irish. It is one of the paradoxes of aesthetic history that the most lyrically sensitive of all peoples have produced no composer of the first —or even the second—rank. They came nearest to it when Ann McMurran, who was born near Belfast four generations ago, became the great-grandmother of Edward MacDowell—the first Celtic voice to speak commandingly out of musical art. But MacDowell was born on Clinton Street, New York, and his Celticism was intermixed with the spiritual traits of nineteenth-century America.

We have lately been reminded of these curious truths by the performance in New York of one of the relatively few attempts at a projection of the Celtic imagination that musical art can show—and the music came from a Scandinavian, not a Celtic, brain. We mean the old *Ossian* Overture of Niels W. Gade, which Mr. Mengelberg restored the other day to the New York concert list after a long period of quiescence.

Two years before Edvard Grieg arrived upon earth to become in time the chief of the Scandinavian romantic school, Gade, then a young man of twenty-four, sent a manuscript overture to the Copenhagen Music Society in competition for a prize. Wagner was then setting the wild northern seas to magnificent music (this was the year of *The Flying Dutchman*); Schumann was composing his first two symphonies; and the United States

was living through the experience of having three Presidents within a space of four years. Life was very full.

As for the young Scandinavian romanticist, he won the Copenhagen Society's prize with his overture, *Nachklänge von Ossian* (Spohr was one of the judges); and he won, too, a royal stipend from King Christian VIII, and the favor of the god-like Mendelssohn, who performed the Overture at a Gewandhaus concert in Leipzig, and afterward took the young Dane under his immaculate wing. When Gade died, almost half a century later, he was, as Mr. Louis Elson points out, "the only musical Dane who had become world-famous . . . yet outside of Denmark his death caused scarcely a ripple."

Mr. Elson (he wrote warmly of Gade in the *Famous Composers* series) could not understand why this was. Did not Gade's "direct and pleasing melody, combined with symmetry of form," constitute a bulwark against that monster of hideous mein and poison breath: "the most modern music"—with its "vagueness and amorphous style," and its "soarings after the infinite"? For instead of calling Gade "Mrs. Mendelssohn," as was the ribald habit of some, Mr. Elson puts it far more beautifully: Gade, he says, reflects the style of that master [Mendelssohn], "when at all, in a most suave and gentle manner, as a moon might reflect the rays of a sun."

Mr. Edward Dannreuther is even handsomer: he confers upon Gade "a distinguished and amiable musical physiognomy; he has always had something to say for himself. . . . His musical speech is tinged with the cadences of Scandinavian folk song, and almost invariably breathes the spirit of northern scenery." As for Schumann, he thought that Gade presented "an entirely new type. It appears as if the nations bordering on Germany were trying to emancipate themselves from the leadership of German music. In the north of Europe, too, we have seen manifestations of national tendencies. The new school of gifted Scandinavian poets must have stimulated the local musicians, in case they were not reminded by the mountains and lakes, the rivers and the auroral displays, of the fact that the north is most decidedly entitled to a language of its own. Our young composer [Gade] was educated by the poets of his fatherland; . . .

and Ossian's giant harp loomed up across the water from the English coast. Thus there is manifested in his music, for the first time, a decided and specific northern character."

Mr. H. T. Finck, who recalls this passage in his book on Grieg, alludes to Grieg's frequently quoted remark about "the Gade-Mendelssohn insipid Scandinavianism," and tells us that Grieg, in private letters to him, "regretted if he should have uttered such a sneer at Gade," whom he had always held "in the highest esteem." But Mr. Finck thinks that such a remark, if Grieg did make it, "would not have been wide of the mark, for Gade certainly does show the influence of Mendelssohn and other German composers much more than that of the Scandinavian folk-music." Yet Mr. Finck thinks that Gade has been shelved too soon: "his *Ossian* overture and one or two of his symphonies would even now give more pleasure to concert-goers than most of the contemporary products [this was said in 1909] of Germany and France, because he was a melodist as well as a colorist."

Mr. Elson observed that Gade was strongly influenced by "the songs of Ossian; and the poet who aroused the ire of Dr. Johnson awakened this musician of the north to the loftiest expression of emotion in the setting of his majestic thoughts in tones."

"The poet who aroused the ire of Dr. Johnson" was of course the Scotchman James Macpherson, who published in 1760-63 his cycle of poems purporting to be translations from the Gaelic of Ossian, the third-century bard and warrior of Celtic tradition. The conclusions of the best modern scholars appear to be that Macpherson was a resourceful but quite reckless liar; and they have shot his "translations" pitifully full of holes,—demonstrating that he confused his sources egregiously; that his third-century Ossian remembers Milton and the Bible; that the Gaelic text as disclosed represents only half of the alleged English equivalent. Nevertheless, as Professor Quiggin points out, "the worthlessness of Macpherson's work as a transcript of actual Celtic poems does not alter the fact that he produced a work of art which by the deep appreciation of natural beauty and the melancholy tenderness of its treatment of the ancient legend did more than any single work to bring about the romantic movement in European, and especially in German, literature."

Ossian (or Ossin or Oisin[1]) "the golden-tongued," most famous bard of the western lands, was the legendary poet-warrior of third-century Ireland, and the chief hero of the second of the two great romantic cycles of the Gael—those embodying the poems and tales of the Fennian period. The ancient Gaelic world survives for us in two outstanding series of epic tales and poems. There is first the body of legends known as the "heroic cycle," which takes us back to about B. C. 50 and portrays the marvellous period of Cuculain the Unconquerable (mightiest of the heroes of the Gael), of Queen Meave, of Naesi, of the matchless Deirdré,—whose loveliness was such, so say the chroniclers, "that not upon the ridge of earth was there a woman so beautiful,"—of Fergus, and Laeg, and Connla the Harper, and those kindred figures, lovely or greatly tragical, that are like no others in the world's mythologies.

"Two hundred summers after the death of Cuculain the hero," says Charles Johnston in his superb history of Ireland, "came the great and wonderful time of Find, the son of Cumal, Ossin the son of Find, and Find's grandson Oscur. It was a period of growth and efflorescence; the spirit and imaginative powers of the people burst forth with the freshness of the prime. The life of the land was more united, coming to a national consciousness." This period (A. D. 200-290) is celebrated in the second of the two great cycles: the Fennian or Ossianic—tales "full of magic and wild prodigies," but conveying "the aroma of forest and the mountain heather; one hears the echo of the huntsman's horn, and sees the rude life of the *Dun*, and the deep drinking of the chief's ale-house. . . . As the epoch of Cuculain shows us our valor finding its apotheosis," says Johnston, "so shall we find in Ossin the perfect flower of our genius for story and song; for romantic life and fine insight into nature."

It is this antique world of stupendous passions and endeavors, of bards and heroes and immense adventure, that we are invited to recognize in any music that would call itself by such a title as "Ossian"—an imaginative world in which we should hear the clashing of shields and "the quiver of stretched bow-

[1] Or "Usheen," as Mr. W. B. Yeats calls him in the revised version of that magnificent Celtic Odyssey, *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889; 1912).

strings"; the war-songs of advancing hosts whose marching shakes the earth; the rumor of wild pagan nights, "when the Gael-strains chant themselves through the mist": music which should remember

> The swift innumerable spears
> The long-haired warriors, the spread feast,
> And love. . . .

and queens heroically passionate, full of splendor and sweetness, tragically beautiful as "a stormy sunset on doomed ships."

This world of pagan, sensuous, heroic beauty must have been in the mind of the youthful Gade when he conceived his rarely-heard overture. That he has, in his music, conveyed the sense of the Gaelic past: that he has "unbound the Island harp": that he has achieved the heroic beauty which is of the essence of the imaginative life of the pagan Celts, it would be absurd to pretend. This music is unrewarding to the imagination, trite and vapid in the ear, utterly colorless and flat.

It is easy to guess at the particular "programme" which Gade may have had in mind when he planned his overture. One might justifiably seek in it heroes and warfare and chanting harpers, and the loveliness of woman, and faëry enchantments, and the setting forth of hunters.

Perhaps Gade remembered one of the chief legends embodied in the Ossianic chronicles, wherein it is told how the poet-hero, while hunting by the River Feale, which flows westward to the sea from the mountains north of Killarney, "among gloomy caverns and ravines, passing through vales full of mysterious echoes amid misty hills," was lured to a cave by "certain ominous fair women," —demons of perilous loveliness,—and there held captive through the procession of the seasons and of the years, though not without those compensations to be expected in the circumstances; until Ossian, wearying of love, found a way to trick his captors: for daily he cut chips from his spear and sent them floating down the stream, till Find, his father, at last perceived them, and knew them as Ossian's, and came and delivered his son from durance among sweet ghosts.

In Mr. Yeats' *Wanderings of Oisin*, the hero relates to St.

Patrick the tale of his three hundred years of wandering in fairy-land, where he was the lover of Niam—three centuries

Of dalliance with a demon thing.

In this poem of Mr. Yeats, Ossian is awakened to old memories out of his dream of love by discovering on the seashore the shaft of a broken lance that recalls to him forgotten human sorrows; yet he lingers on for several centuries longer ["the first hundred years," said Mr. Briggs, "are the hardest"] wandering over the world with Niam, before he returns to his own kind. Thereafter, fulfilling a magic prophecy of evil, he touches the ground by accident, falls from his horse, and becomes at once most horribly aged —"a creeping old man, full of sleep." He is brought before Saint Patrick, unrepentant and defiant, rejecting the promise of salvation, and declaring that he will join his pagan companions, "be they in flames or at feast."

In Gade's music, at least, Ossian does not end at a feast or in hell but seemingly patterns after Mr. Yeats' young wanderer, and lies down again by the side of Niam in the long grass of the Island of Forgetfulness, where the trees drop slow silence and the dews spread peace, and

The red sun falls, and the world grows dim,

and the lovers sleep for a hundred years.—But all these things have failed to kindle the imagination of Gade. His music is as thin, as arid, as untouched by passion or glamor or heroic splendor, as if Ossian and Find and Niam had never sorrowed or loved or dreamed.

. . . . .

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast to Gade's overture than the Chicago Symphony Orchestra offered us, at about the same time, during the recent visit to New York of that mature and mellowed and beautifully satisfying band and its admirable conductor, Mr. Stock. The Chicago band played here, for the first time, a symphonic poem, *The Garden of Fand* by one of the younger and more adventurous clan of British music-makers, Arnold Bax. Bax is still under twenty-eight, a native of London, a modernist. He proved at once that in addition to being a modernist, he is also a poet, a dreamer, a spinner

of shining tonal webs. And, best of all, he is, spiritually viewed, a musical Celt, despite his London origin. He has Gaelic blood in him, has lived in the West of Ireland, has consorted with the great men of the "Celtic Renaissance." He has composed much music of Irish content and coloring, of which we know only *The Garden of Fand.* In this tone-poem, we get the true tang and odor of Celtic poetry, for the first time in our musical experience since the unique MacDowell gave us his magnificent and valid *Keltic* Sonata twenty years ago—a score that, in its conveyance of the heroic note in the Celtic imagination, is still unapproached.

The music of Bax is in a different emotional world, though it is essentially and authentically Celtic. It is far more subtle, more delicate, more complex than MacDowell's; and it is saturated with that "Celtic magic" for which Arnold, in his famous *cliché,* taught us to look, but which is so rarely to be found in music. Bax, like MacDowell in his *Keltic* Sonata, has gone to the Cuchullin legends for his poetic material. As Mr. Felix Borowski reminded us in his excellent annotations for the Chicago Orchestra's performance, "Cuchullin, the Achilles of the ancient Irish, is a warrior of great prowess who, after a year's sickness, is lured from the world of battles and brave deeds by Fand, wife of Manannan, the Sea God. In the hour of his country's bitter need Cuchullin forgets duty and all else save the enchantments of an immortal woman. But Emer, Cuchullin's wife, follows the warrior to strive with the goddess for his love—strives successfully; for Fand takes pity upon Emer and renounces her mortal love, and Manannan, the Sea God, shakes his Cloak of Forgetfulness between Cuchullin and Fand, so that each is utterly blotted out in the memories of both."

As for Bax's music, the composer himself has expounded its poetical subject-matter.

"This tone poem," he says, "has no special relation to the events of the saga. The Garden of Fand is the sea itself. At the outset of the work the composer seeks to create the atmosphere of the enchanted Atlantic, utterly calm and still beneath a fairy spell. Upon its surface floats a small ship bearing a few human voyagers adventuring from the shores of Erin towards the sunset dream, as St. Brendan and the sons of O'Connor and Maeldune

had adventured before them. The little craft is borne on beneath a sky of amethyst and pearl and rose, until, on the crest of an immense wave, it is cast onto the shores of Fand's miraculous island. Here in eternal sunlight unhuman revelry continues ceaselessly between the ends of time. The travelers are caught, unresisting, into the maze of the dance. A pause comes, and Fand sings her song of immortal love, claiming the souls of her hearers forever. The dancing and feasting begin again, and finally the sea, rising, overwhelms the whole island, the people of the Sidhe riding in rapture upon the ridges of the green and golden waves, and laughing carelessly amidst the foam at the fate of the over-rash mortals, lost forever in the unfathomable depths of ocean. The sea subsides again, the veils of twilight cloud the other world, and the Garden of Fand fades from our sight."

Bax has put all this upon his orchestra with singular poetic intensity, singular eloquence and beauty. He is, of course, a child of his time, and he cannot forget Debussy. But Debussy, admittedly, is hard to forget; and when we think of the manifold exquisiteness of Bax's score, we have not the heart to remind him that, as Meredith once mordantly observed, "our new thoughts have thrilled dead bosoms."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.